Advancing Learner Autonomy in TEFL Via Collaborative Learning

George Jacobs and Tan Hui Shan
James Cook University Singapore

Introduction

Learner autonomy has been defined as "a capacity to control important aspects of one's learning" (Benson, 2013, p. 852). In the teaching of additional languages, learner autonomy dates back at least to the 1970s. For instance, Trim, who was a leader in the teaching of additional languages in Europe, stated that a goal of language education was to:

> make the process of language learning more democratic by providing the conceptual tools for the planning, construction and conduct of courses closely geared to the needs, motivations and characteristics of the learner and enabling him [sic] so far as possible to steer and control his own progress. (1978, p. 1)

Some people erroneously believe that learner autonomy means students always learning alone, without the involvement of teachers or peers. However, in reality, learner autonomy often involves students learning together with peers. Collaborative learning (CL), also known as cooperative learning (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 2007) is an approach in which students study together as one vehicle for learning. The CL literature provides teachers with useful guidance in how they can play their important roles in facilitating peer interaction.

The present paper begins by situating learner autonomy and CL as part of a larger paradigm shift towards student-centred learning. Next are brief discussions of learner autonomy and how learner autonomy links with CL. In the main part of the paper, four central principles of CL are explained: maximum peer interactions, equal opportunities to participate, individual accountability and positive interdependence. The discussion of each

principle includes what the principle involves, why the principle is important and how the principle can be implemented.

The Paradigm Shift Towards Student-Centred Instruction

A key feature of the move in Education from Behaviourist to Cognitivist perspectives (Gardner, 1985) has been the paradigm shift away from teacher-centred instruction towards student-centred instruction (Farrell & Jacobs, 2010). In student-centred instruction, students play a more active role in shaping their own learning environments, including what and how they learn. Learner autonomy represents an important element of student-centred instruction. Paradigm shifts seldom occur smoothly or quickly, as they involve major adjustments in perceptions and practices. Thus, it comes as no surprise that many problems have been encountered in implementing learner autonomy and other student-centred practices.

Murphey (1998) proposed a five-movement journey which many students travel as they become more autonomous. These five overlapping and sometime co-occurring movements are socialization, dawning metacognition, initiating choice, expanding autonomy, and critical collaborative autonomy. The first movement – socialization - involves learners in feeling comfortable in the culture of their learning environment. Peer interaction can play an important role here. For instance, students might take part in teambuilding and classbuilding activities.

Murphey used the term dawning metacognition for the second movement toward learner autonomy. Here, students become aware of their own learning processes. Peer interaction can facilitate this awareness as students discuss with peers their emerging perceptions of their own thinking and learning. Furthermore, students can observe each other's unique approaches to learning. Teachers can facilitate this dawning metacognition by encouraging students to explain to each other how they arrived at answers, rather than merely sharing end products. Thinking aloud (Alhaisoni, 2012) offers one way for students to share their thinking.

The third movement towards learner autonomy is initiating choice. Of course, students make choices all the time about their learning, for instance, how much time they will spend on homework or whether they will do extensive reading in the additional language they are studying. However, students may not be accustomed to teachers giving them the formal power to make decisions. Some choices that students can make include selecting which

learning activities to do from among a number of possible activities. Additionally, students can choose which roles to play and tasks to do within their learning groups.

The fourth movement, according to Murphey, that students make in their journey towards becoming autonomous learners – expanding autonomy - builds on the first three movements. Here, students take even greater control over their learning. For example, they can take part in self- and peer assessment, initiate their own learning activities inside and outside of class and provide feedback to teachers and other education professionals about how to shape instruction. As students take part in the movement of expanding autonomy, they are moving towards becoming life-long learners (Demirci, 2012) who contribute to communities of knowledge (Kevany & MacMichael, 2014).

Critical collaborative autonomy (Murphey & Jacobs, 2000) is Murphey's term for the fifth movement towards learner autonomy. In this movement, students recognise the dynamic tension between many benefits of collaboration, on one hand, and on the other hand, the need for each person to do their fair share in collective endeavours whilst maintaining what Murphey (1998, p. 28) called a "respectful interdependence". Critical collaborative autonomy represents a step outside the first four movements also because students extend their vision beyond empowering themselves or the members of their small group of peers to examining how they can use what they learn to benefit society more generally, especially the less powerful members of society.

Learner Autonomy and Collaborative Learning

From the student-centred perspective, educators main role is to act as facilitators, as guides on the side. Student centred educators appreciate that, in the final analysis, students control their own learning. Palmer (1998, p. 6), writing about tertiary education, explained this point well:

> I have no question that students who learn, not professors who perform, is what teaching is all about. ... Teachers possess the power to create conditions that can help students learn a great deal--or keep them from learning much at all. Teaching is the intentional act of creating those conditions.

Learner autonomy in TEFL contexts represents a significant manifestation of student-centric education. Dickinson (1999, p. 2) defined learner autonomy as "an attitude to learning that the learner develops in which the learner is willing and able to make the significant

decisions about her learning, ..." Thus, in learner autonomy, students move away from dependence on teachers. Many books and articles of L2 (second language) instruction advocate learner autonomy, and student-student collaboration is one of the methods advocated for advancing learner autonomy. By collaborating with peers, students can become less dependent on teachers.

Student-student collaboration enjoys strong roots in learning theory. For instance, Vygotsky (1978) highlighted the social nature of learning and the role of language in this social learning. Collaboration provides a venue for such social learning. Furthermore, collaboration offers many benefits in many other areas of life, from music to the work world to the family (Heffernan, 2014; Johnson & Johnson, 2013; Kohn 1992). Collaboration among peers may be especially beneficial. Hartup (1992) posited a crucial role for peer interaction in the social and intellectual development of children, as well as to success in adulthood.

Peer collaboration in education can be very powerful. Indeed, a large body of research suggests that collaboration among students can lead to superior results on a wide range of cognitive and affective variables, including achievement, thinking skills, interethnic relations, liking for school, and self-esteem (Ibáñez, García Rueda, Maroto, & Kloos, 2013; Currently, Johnson, Johnson, & Stanne, 2000; Liang, Mohan, & Early, 1998; Slavin, 1995). Currently, a steady stream of research continues to investigate many areas of CL, as can be seen from a search of online databases and in the 'From the Journals' listings in the e-newsletter of the International Association for the Study of Cooperation in Education (IASCE) (IASCE, 2014).

Unfortunately, sometimes students may be reluctant to cooperate with peers (e.g., Matthews, 1992), just as similarly, students may be reluctant to become more autonomous (Little, 2007). Furthermore, the authors' own experience is that many teachers prefer only infrequent use of student-student interaction. Reasons for this unwillingness to make more frequent use of group activities (groups are defined here as consisting of between 2-4 students) include:

(1) group activities necessitate time away from the direct dissemination of information by teachers;

(2) students may mislead each other;

(3) student groups may go off task; and

(4) groups of students may function poorly, e.g., some students may not do their fair share, whereas others may attempt to hinder participation by groupmates.

Collaborative Learning Principles

Many principles have been developed to guide the implementation of CL in the teaching of TEFL and other additional languages (Jacobs & Kimura, 2013). Four of these principles are presented below: maximum peer interactions, equal opportunity to participate, individual accountability and positive interdependence. The discussion of each principle has three parts:

(1) what the principle means

(2) why the principle is important

(3) how to implement the principle.

Maximum Peer Interactions

What the principle means. The CL principle of maximum peer interactions has two related meanings. The first meaning encourages a greater quantity of peer interactions. When teachers address a class full of students, zero peer interactions are taking place, because in the context of school, teachers are not their students' peers. When one student speaks and the other students in the class listen, e.g., when a teacher calls one student to speak, one peer interaction is taking place, between that one student and their classmates. In contrast, when students collaborate in groups of two, three or four, many peer interactions are potentially taking place, e.g., in a class of 50 students, divided into pairs, 25 peer interactions are potentially taking place.

The second meaning of the maximum peer interactions concerns the quality of the peer interactions. When students use higher order thinking skills (Chiang, et al., 2013; Webb, et al., 2009), their interactions become richer in terms of learning, engagement and depth of processing (Järvelä, Hurme, & Järvenoja, 2011). In addition to the use of thinking skills, another indication of the quality of peer interactions involves students' use of collaborative skills, such as praising and thanking others, requesting and providing examples, listening attentively and disagreeing politely.

This emphasis on maximizing the quantity and quality of peer interactions does not mean that teachers should never talk to the class or never ask only one student to speak. Similarly, interactions among students in which they merely provide simple information, such as what is the next step in an activity, rather than engaging in higher order thinking, can also be valuable. Thus, the CL principle of maximum peer interaction does not call for exclusive use of peer discussions, nor does it call for students to only engage in higher order think or to always mobilize their collaborative skills. Instead, the principle encourages a

greater role for small group discussions and for the use of higher order thinking and collaborative skills.

Why the principle is important. Learner autonomy for TEFL instruction fits well with the principle of maximum peer interactions because the principle involves students in the active shaping of their learning environments. The quantity aspect of the CL principle of maximum peer interactions seeks to increase students' activity level. The quality aspect seeks to enhance students' thinking (Kuhn, 2015). Higher order thinking may not only contribute to short-term learning, but may also empower students to be more active and discerning shapers of their own learning and of the wider world in which they are citizens. The collaborative skills element of quality peer interactions also contributes to greater learning (Gillies, 2007), as well as making learning a more pleasant process.

How to implement the principle. The quantity aspect of the CL principle of maximum peer interactions can be fostered by encouraging students to interact in small groups. For example, groups of four allow students to work in pairs, which may result in the largest number of peer interactions. At other times, the two pairs can combine to form foursomes, thereby bringing the knowledge and experiences of two more people into the learning circle of each of the pairs. In a similar vein, when groups of four have finished a task, rather than one group at a time sharing with teachers and the entire class, groups or group representatives can move to other groups and share with those other groups. In this manner, multiple peer interactions continue to take place.

Equal Opportunity to Participate

What the principle means. The CL principle of equal opportunity to participate addresses the problem of one or more group members dominating the group, thereby restricting the participation of their groupmate(s).

Why the principle is important. Students whose participation is restricted by groupmates are deprived of opportunities to exercise control over their own learning, as their learning options are fettered. Such restriction of access to peer interaction can occur for many reasons, one of the most important reasons being that students may misunderstand the purpose of groups. Students in TEFL environments too often take a short term view, focusing on the task before them and losing sight of long-term learning objectives. Students may not understand that in CL, the goal is not the immediate task, such as answering a set of questions

that accompany a reading passage. Instead, the group's goal should be the learning of all group members.

When some students are excluded from the group interactions, those students may learn less and enjoy less. At the same time, the rest of the group members lose the benefits of interacting with the excluded person(s). For instance, if excluded group members are less proficient at the task the group is undertaking, the other group members miss out on peer tutoring opportunities they would have had if everyone had been included.

How to implement the principle. CL offers more than 100 ways for students to organise their interaction. These interaction scripts are designed to facilitate CL principles. For instance, in Circle of Writers (One at a Time) (Jacobs, Power, & Loh, 2002), each group has one piece of paper or one electronic device, and each member takes a turn to write, while partners can give assistance and feedback. For instance, each group can create a mindmap to summarise and elaborate on a text they have read or an experience they have had. In Circle of Writers (One at a Time), the group creates a single mindmap (Buisine, Besacier, Aoussat, & Vernier, 2012). As the mindmap is being created, group members take turns in the construction. To further emphasise the need for everyone to have opportunities to participate, each student can write in a different colour. Later, teachers call on group members at random to report to the class or another group on what their group has created.

Individual Accountability

What the principle means. While the CL principle of equal opportunity to participate seeks to provide chances for all group members to play important roles in their groups, the principle of individual accountability seeks to put pressure on students to do their fair share in the groups. In other words, students have pressure to contribute what they can to the learning of their group members. If instead of feeling individually accountable, some students become freeloaders, group morale may suffer, and students may come to dislike group (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 2007).

Why the principle is important. Learner autonomy and individual accountability fit well together. Learner autonomy in TEFL encourages students to take an active role in their own learning. Individual accountability might be seen as taking this a step further, with students also playing a role in the learning of their peers. By participating actively in their groups, both in terms of doing activities and in terms of shaping those activities, students help themselves and peers.

How to implement the principle. The CL literature offers many ideas for promoting individual accountability. For instance, when doing projects, groups can create rosters to record who has agreed to do what and when, and to monitor if it is done. Then, peers can take part in assessing their groupmates when group assessment is used, and other times, individual assessment can be used, or group and individual assessment can be combined.

Another way that teachers can promote individual ability arises after groups have worked together on a task. Too often, teachers call on a group, and the group chooses who will represent the group. Such a practice makes it too easy for some students to hide, to avoid preparing themselves to present and to avoid helping groupmates prepare. However, if teachers randomly call a group member, this encourages everyone to be ready and to help their group members to be ready.

Positive Interdependence

What the principle means. Positive interdependence represents a feeling students have that their outcomes are positively correlated with the outcomes of their CL partners, i.e., group members believe that whatever benefits one of their groupmates benefits all the others, and what hinders one hinders all the others. Thus, when students feel positively interdependent, they bring to life the motto of the Three Musketeers "All for one; one for all". While, on one hand, the principle of individual accountability puts pressure on group members to contribute their fair share to the group, on the other hand, the principle of positive interdependence offers support from the group.

Why the principle is important. As noted earlier, learner autonomy is not mainly about individual students going off by themselves to learn, although learning alone can be one important mode of learning. Instead, learner autonomy represents students choosing how they want to learning from a range of options. Cohesive groups, in which members collaborate towards the benefit of all, present students with what could potentially be an attractive option for learning. Furthermore, feeling positively interdependence with others motivate students to learn, because they are learning not just for themselves but also for the benefit of their fellow group members.

How to implement the principle. CL has developed many means of encouraging students to feel positively interdependent with their peers. One good first step is for groups to have a clear group goal. For instance, in the CL script 'Everyone Can Explain', students work together on a task offered by their teachers, such as answering a set of discussion questions.

As students work together on the questions, they have the goal that all group members will be able to give and explain their group's responses.

In addition to group goals, one of several other means of encouraging groups to feel that they all sink or swim together is for each group member to have different resources. For example, each group member could be given different materials on the same overall topic or they could go online to find materials by themselves. Then, students take turns to teach their unique information to their groupmates. Afterwards, students individually take a quiz or do an assignment which requires information from all the subtopics (Aronson, 2015). An example of a topic would be vegetarians, with subtopics being different reasons why some people choose to follow vegetarian diets, such as to promote human health, to reduce environment destruction, to show kindness to nonhuman animals and to make food resources available to the hundreds of millions of people who do not have enough to eat.

Conclusion

This paper reviewed some of the rationale for learner autonomy, some of the movements students take towards becoming more autonomous learners, links between learner autonomy and collaborative learning (CL) and principles of CL that can help students learn together more affectively as they become more autonomous. Geary (1998, p. 1) put it well by stating that students can go, "From dependence toward independence via interdependence". Similarly, Harmer (1998, p. 21) emphasized the close connections between learner autonomy and student-student collaboration when he stated:

[Group activities] give students chances for greater independence. Because they are working together without the teacher controlling every move, they take some of their own learning decisions, they decide what language to use to complete a certain task, and they can work without the pressure of the whole class listening to what they are doing. Decisions are cooperatively arrived at, responsibilities are shared.

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